

View Beyond Watergate

Politicians of Both Parties Refocusing

By David S. Broder
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The Republican Party yesterday came close to a formal break with Richard M. Nixon, and the Democrats readjusted their sights to a political world without a Watergate issue.

Politicians in both parties and their public opinion advisers began a wrenching process of refocusing on a political landscape in which most assumed the dominant figure would be Gerald R. Ford.

Almost ignoring Mr. Nixon's reiterated intention to fight against removal from office, Republicans said with near-unanimity—and some Democrats conceded—that if Ford succeeds to the presidency this fall, as most of them now expect, it would mean happier returns for the GOP in both the 1974 and 1976 elections than anything that could have been expected a week ago.

In an avalanche of reaction to Monday's disclosure by Mr. Nixon of his own long-suppressed role in the Watergate cover-up, droves of GOP congressmen and party officials abandoned their defense of the President and called for his quick impeachment or resignation.

Several key GOP officials urged Republican National Chairman George Bush to formalize the break by joining

Republican governors, senators and representatives in expressing disapproval of the President's conduct.

His opposite number, Democratic National Chairman Robert S. Strauss, called on both Ford and Bush "to make clear whether their first loyalty is to Richard Nixon or to the American public."

Despite the pressure from his own and the opposition party, Bush last night issued only a bland statement expressing his "deep feelings for those who supported the President on the basis of the facts . . . which they believed to be true" and his continued "confidence the President will do what is right—what is best for the country."

The statement said "resignation is something that the President alone must decide," and urged that if there is an impeachment trial, it be held in "as expeditious a manner as possible to spare the nation more trauma."

The troubled GOP chairman told a reporter yesterday, "I understand that there may be criticism from some party people, but that is all that I can say."

Strauss, in a telephone interview from California during the afternoon period when Bush was shuttling between the White House and his head-

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quarters on Capitol Hill, said both Ford and Bush had "done a disservice to the American people over the past two months by insisting on the innocence of the President when it was becoming increasingly obvious that he was not innocent."

Ford had announced Monday night that he would neither repudiate nor reaffirm his own previous statements of confidence in Mr. Nixon's innocence of any impeachable offense, and he held to that vow of silence yesterday.

Strauss said that he believed that "the way Ford and others have positioned themselves has come back to haunt them," but he insisted that the Democrats would not perpetuate the Watergate issue solely for campaign purposes.

"I have consistently said that those candidates who run on Watergate didn't deserve to be elected and probably wouldn't be," Strauss said, "so I don't think we'd make any major change in our campaign strategy at all if Ford is in the presidency."

"Ford's position on domestic issues

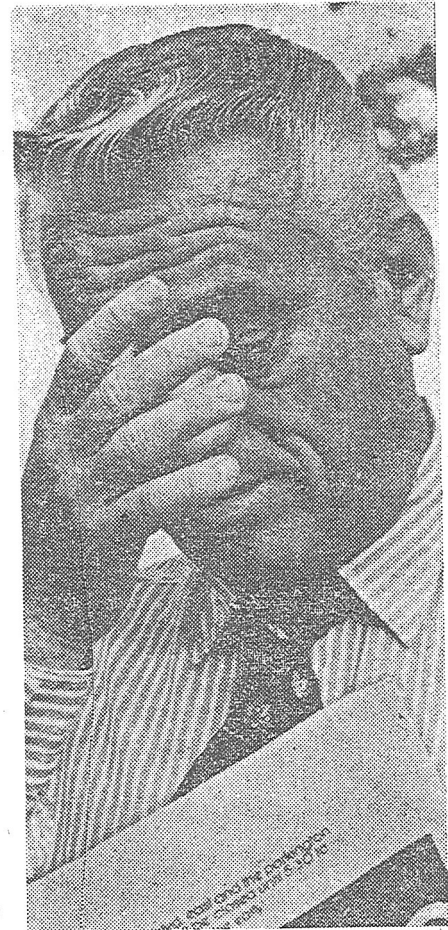
relates very closely to Mr. Nixon's," the Democratic chairman said, "so we'd still run on the basic pocketbook issues and the question of unmet human needs that we'd always planned to use."

Despite Bush's agonizing, the general reaction among Republican politicians—after Monday night's initial shock at the President's disclosure—was almost one of relief yesterday.

Before, House Minority Leader John J. Rhodes (R-Ariz.) held his late-afternoon press conference—canceled Monday ostensibly because of laryngitis—to declare his support for impeachment, good-humored GOP congressmen joshed him, "Hey, John, you've got your voice back."

Many Republican Members said the President's confession of complicity in the cover-up had made it possible for them to urge his quick removal—a step that most of them had long ago concluded was in their own best interests politically.

Typical of this group was Houston I. Flournoy, the underdog Republican candidate for governor of California. Flournoy, a progressive Republican



Associated Press

Wiggins: a "painful" conclusion.

who has been elected twice as state controller, had been privately critical of Mr. Nixon for months, but was fearful of antagonizing the President's hard-core conservative supporters in his native state.

But Monday night, he called the President's admission "unbelievable", and called for his resignation.

Yesterday, the man Flournoy is seeking to succeed, Gov. Ronald Reagan, a staunch Nixon defender, said he was "deeply disturbed" by the revelations but would not urge resignation. Instead, Reagan said it was "imperative" that the President "go before the Congress immediately and make a full disclosure of all the information he has on this matter. . . ."

Reagan aides disclosed that he is rewriting a speech for Thursday's Republican telethon in California in an effort to emphasize that Watergate is not a Republican responsibility. They described him as approving Flournoy's statement and is hopeful that the disassociation will improve Flournoy's chances against the Democratic nominee, Secretary of State Edmund G. Brown Jr.

Significantly, Flournoy's pro-resignation statement was echoed by H. L. (Bill) Richardson, the staunchly conservative Republican candidate against Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.).

The new-found Republican unity was visible in other major states where party officials had earlier anticipated an autumn campaign in which the GOP candidates were split down the middle on the impeachment issue.

For example, all nine Republican congressmen from Michigan lined up on the side of impeachment yesterday, and Gov. William G. Milliken (R) said the President would likely be forced to resign.

The same thing occurred in New Hampshire, where Gov. Meldrim Thomson (R) and Rep. Louis Wyman (R-N.H.), a prospective Senate candidate, switched sides simultaneously and came out against the President.

Noting this phenomenon, public opinion analyst Patrick Caddell, who had been the pollster for the 1972 McGovern campaign and is working for several Democratic candidates this year, said in an interview yesterday, "I'm beginning to think the Republicans

can rehabilitate themselves on this issue."

Caddell said Republicans "now have an opportunity to turn this thing around," because the actions of Republican members who argued and voted for impeachment during the televised proceedings of the House Judiciary Committee "showed people there are Republicans of conscience . . . who do their duty as Americans.

"If they get rid of Nixon any time this month," he said, "they might really be in a position to turn this election around. It could make November a referendum on Jerry Ford—and that would help a lot of Republicans who are not very serious challengers right now."

Other Democrats, however, said they thought it unlikely there would be as dramatic a recovery in Republican fortunes as Caddell seemed to suggest.

Strauss and his political deputy, Robert J. Keefe, both argued that Ford's own long record of opposition to Democratic domestic programs in Congress and his close association

with the Nixon administration would validate the Democrats' economic issues.

"Ford's got a long record on issues of housing and health care and matters of concern to working people," Strauss said, "and he and his party are going to have to live with it."

"Our problem," said Keefe, "has been to get the voters' minds off Page 1 impeachment stories and onto the Page 3 and 4 economic stories. When Nixon leaves, our issues move onto Page 1."

Another Democratic pollster, Peter Hart, agreed that "the Democrats are better off without the Watergate issue," but he and Caddell both questioned whether a Ford administration, in its early months, would be held responsible by the voters for the economic ills that are troubling the country now.

"What we're going through is like an assassination," Hart said, "and after an assassination, what everyone wants is to look forward, not backward. Honesty and responsiveness are the keys, and on those, the Republicans have to be better off with Ford."